

New Art Examiner review

Time Arts

Chuck Kleinhans
2620 N. Richmond
Chicago IL 60647
312-252-6616

Film

Chicago

James Benning

Chicago Filmmakers

6 W. Hubbard St., 312/329-0854

February 7, 1987
presenting Landscape Suicide
(16mm, color, sound, 95 min., 1986)

by Chuck Kleinhans

Landscape Suicide (16mm, color, sound, 95 min., 1986) presents a new aspect of James Benning's filmwork. The familiar Benning static and moving views of Midwest landscapes and cityscapes of 8 1/2 x 11 and 11 x 14 expand with a new location: the green hills of a San Francisco suburb. And the extremely elliptical hint of a story found in his earliest New Narratives now becomes something close to pure docudrama in presenting the legal testimony of two murderers. Bernadette Protti, played by Rhonda Bell, is a teen who, with no distinct aggravation, stabbed a female cheerleader at her school, and Ed Gein, played by Elion Sucher, was in the 1950s an older Wisconsin farmer who killed and skinned a series of victims.

In part the film evokes the same morbid interest people have in Michael Lesy's Wisconsin Death Trip collection of photos from the past with its accompanying text listing period accounts of unusual deaths. Lesy's anti-history invites the reader to make a connection between distant and usually banal image on the one hand and journalistic accounts of the curious and sensational on the other. In the process of reading, however, a

sense of accumulating dread builds because the everyday past which seemed so safe in the images, as we gradually read of the deaths seems to mask a deep and recurring evil, an inexplicable eruption of death.

Benning works in a similar vein of juxtaposition. The winter landscape shots of Plainfield, Wisconsin, where Ed Grien shot squirrels and his neighbors, but not deer, are powerfully evocative of the Northern Midwest land and climate, suggesting a barren setting for a crime. Benning finds the hollow recital of Gein's ghoulish career echoed in the sparse winter countryside. As in his previous work, the exoticism of Milwaukee, or Chicago, or rural Wisconsin (exotic relative to the New York art world, that is) is set sharply in Benning's vision. While presenting a photographically powerful image, usually sliced by a horizon line, he seems to be saying, "Look, a drama you don't see took place in this scene."

But the California shots do not work as well in conveying a sense of surface and depth. A master of planimetric composition which serves him well in prairie and industrial landscape, Benning fails to achieve a complete sense of the hillside suburbs, even in a signature long tracking shot through curving and climbing streets of middle class homes. The truth that Benning seeks in surface fails him for he stays outside of the schools, cars, shopping malls, and drive-ins of West Coast teen life. When he does go inside, in a teen bedroom (obviously a set) with a young woman on the phone, seated on her bed (and very unconvincingly played), while we hear song from the popular musical *Cats*, the scene is hardly expressive. Apparently the sugary commercial song presents a correlative to the emptiness of a life which is materially secure but socially and emotionally dead and in which adolescent feelings of jealousy and inferiority can develop into a murderous behavior.

Benning is trying to explore psychology and motivation, or more precisely, lack of motivation, in his character. His Bernadette enacts a distracted confession while wearing a pale lavender top and posed against a pale green-yellow cinder block wall, colors which give a sickly connotation to the interview. At the same time, the unmoving camera's presentation is interrupted by short black frame bursts to indicate ellipses in the testimony and startle the audience out of any lazy regard for the lengthy shots.

However, in showing California Benning seems vague and hesitant rather than incisive. The suburbs have been a prime target of social and political criticism, both ironic and crude, commercial and avant garde, for decades now. Benning's conceptualization and cinematography fail him here. He cannot get much leverage on this site, and he seems to have less

understanding of California and teens than a slick hit like Valley Girl or Fast Times at Ridgemont High.

Benning is making a connection between the Eisenhower America's gruesome Ed Gein and the Reagan Era's blank Bernadette Protti. As with some of Benning's other films, the linking of apparently unconnected scenes and events invites a political reading, but the filmmaker avoids stating any obvious meaning. A soundtrack of popular songs and ambient sounds (or one suspects, at times, artificially constructed sound passing for environmental) cuts under and against the image most of the time, adding a richness to the deflated and undramatic recital of Protti's testimony to an investigator and a selection of Gein's courtroom admissions in his 11 month long trial. Benning wants us to hear the emptiness, the hollowness of mind, emotionless narration that was in the original document. By having the lines delivered in a flat and affectless way, he foregrounds the fact that these murderers are not the irrational mad killers who use forceful brutality in teen favorite horror films. Nor are they the super rational assassins of crime and spy stories. Rather they are thoughtless, emotionless, and affectless people who perfectly fit into their society, except that they murder.

Benning has gone hunting for murder, with a female narrator who speaks in the film of her own investigations. This is the familiar ground of reporting and detective work. Why did someone commit the crime? If this film denies the same old neat explanations, flakey or Freudian, offered so freely in the sensational tabloid press and eye-to-a-Pulitzer reportage, then it does break with the dominant norms. But there seems to be no way of connecting up the consciousness of these criminals with any significant cause or context. In the absence of any fuller understanding, the landscape offers a substitution for the explanation. But billboards, water storage tanks, parking lots, and snowy prairies do not speak. There is no explanation, or else it lies elsewhere.

What does the state of mind of Gein or Protti reveal? That we live in a society in which a small number of people senselessly, almost arbitrarily, kill others out of neither direct passion nor coldhearted cruelty, but just vapidly, certainly says something about our country and life. But what? The press and broadcast media can sensationalize it, and so can Hollywood, and the avant garde. It is a symptom, granted, but there's not enough here to make a diagnosis.

In his earlier work Benning re-ordered our pleasures in feature length film. But now that he controls a wide range of impressive cinematic skills, he hesitates. The film ends with a lengthy shot of a deer

carcass being gutted. Here is the absent violence of the Gein story finally presented on screen (and thus giving us a little visual thrill), but it doesn't begin to have the impact of say, killing the pig or the grandmother in Godard's Weekend. Benning investigates, but then seems unwilling to speak.

Chuck Kleinhans is co-editor of Jump Cut.